

EXPLORE

INDONESIA

SWELL PLAYED

By skipping around unspoilt islands in the Indonesian archipelago, *Kudanil Explorer* offers its guests access to an aquatic haven far from the crowded breaks of Bali. The souped-up charter yacht reinvents the idea of a surfing expedition with a patina of luxe and an aura of exclusivity.

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BREAK POINT

The south coast of Sumba is one of the stops on an expedition around the islands of surfing mecca Indonesia.



POINT OF VIEW
Left: Author Pete Geall enjoys the view from one of eight private cabins on the *Kudanil Explorer*. Right: Each cabin has its own balcony and ensuite (top). Geall preparing to enter the surf zone from an inflatable tender.

Small beads of seawater bounce rhythmically across the deck of a tender speeding by Sumba. The Indonesian island’s wild coastline is flanked by limestone cliffs with rolling hills beyond, and the thatched huts of its ikat-wearing denizens, many of whom abide by ancient animist traditions. Our immediate concern is worship of a different kind. A shaft of early morning light pierces the clouds overhead, illuminating a powerful wave coiling down a reef shelf towards a bay. The back of the swell rises provocatively from the deep before collapsing in a roaring mass of whitewater and foam. This primal scene captures the attention of everyone aboard our small inflatable craft.

“We getting in there or what?” says Nathan Hedge, leading the impulsive charge into the Indian Ocean. A veteran surfer from Sydney, Hedge gets to work, carving his way through the world-class waves this untouched region is renowned for. Taking my time, I ease myself into the tropical Indian Ocean for the first time and make my way towards the line-up. My arrival coincides with an incoming set of five waves that draw water off the shallow reef as though a bath plug had been sharply removed. Hedge, positioned far beyond the breaking waves, elects to let the first four pass underneath him. Pivoting on his board, he swings behind the peak of the lip before positioning himself down the steep face on the last and largest of the set. Locked tight in a cylindrical tube of water, he grins from ear to ear.

Between waves, I can make out the *Kudanil Explorer*, our floating residence during a week-long surfing adventure in the islands of East Nusa Tenggara. The luxe 50-metre expedition yacht was a utilitarian safety standby vessel before being sleekly reimagined by owner Thibault Epstein. Epstein recognised that a growing number of visitors to Indonesia sought more than monkey forests and monkeying around. “People who want luxury and adventure wrapped up as one,” he told me, describing his ideal guest. “Those who want to be part of the story, rather than a participant on a rigid itinerary.”

We had met a few days earlier at the ramshackle port of Waikelo on Sumba, our embarkation point before navigating the sprawling archipelago that spans more than 5000 kilometres in boundless shades of blue. The rendezvous with the ship, surrounded by a clutch of rusted and sunken hulks, had the distinct air of a clandestine spy swap. I’m joined on board by a mixture of guests, ranging from those with the pro-level surf skills of Hedge to complete novices such as Lannie Churchill, for whom the appeal of an



Indonesian surfing jaunt was an irresistible departure from her work as a lawyer in London. Also joining us is Zia Suarez, a modern-day triple threat from South Africa who is adept at surfing, skating and social media.

Before our trip, the *Kudanil* journeyed through the Spice Islands and West Papua in search of marine exploits beneath the surface. Appointed with an array of equipment, the boat can be tapped to access remote dive spots and observe sights such as migrating whale sharks. The primary objective of our charter is to search out fresh surfing frontiers along the lesser-visited eastern island chains between Sumba and Timor. Matching the vessel’s oceanic capabilities – its speed and reach open up a larger area of exploration in this staggeringly diverse area – are its three tenders used for scouting shallow, uncharted parts of the coast and to ferry guests to an impromptu picnic on a secluded bay.

The ship can accommodate up to 16 guests staying in eight polished cabins. With tasteful wood furnishings, ensuite bathrooms, private terraces, and even air-conditioning, the berths recall a stylish apartment in Seminyak. Considered touches abound: a selection of handcrafted Neal Purchase Jnr surfboards for everyday use; iced banana lassis served to still-dripping guests after a session; surf guides who understand not only the local conditions, but tailor the program to match individual ability levels. A team of 21 good-humoured crew members, from sushi chefs to massage therapists, cater to the guests. On the top deck is a shaded lounge where meals are served, friends are made and memorable outings are plotted and avidly recounted.

Indonesia has been etched on the collective surfing psyche since the discovery of Bali’s wave-rich Bukit Peninsula in 1972. The unearthing of the tropical surf idyll, immortalised in Alby Falzon’s seminal film *Morning of the Earth*, inspired a generation to make the pilgrimage and tirelessly scour the country for the next perfect ride. This ceaseless search for the novel has become a defining trope of surf culture. In recent times, the idealistic yearning for uncrowded waves has butted up against the physical reality of increasing surfing populations around the world, triggering something of an identity crisis for the sport. In the more commonly frequented Indonesian surfing locations of Bali and the Mentawai Islands in the north, overcrowding in the water and unsustainable development on land has dulled the allure of visiting for many.

Intrepid surfers seeking their own slice of paradise have had to become more inventive, with an underground contingent turning their back on the tropics and towards colder destinations in outlying locations. Much of my own personal surf travel during the past decade has been focused on these areas. From the rugged





FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Guests Zia Suarez and Lannie Churchill discover a footprint-free tropical beach. Right: One of the *Kudani*'s tenders takes guests to a surf break. Seated, from left, are Geall and Nathan Hedge. At rear (left) is *Kudani*'s owner Thibaud Epstein and staff members.



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coastline and isles of Scotland, with its peat-stained waters and reefs of Caithness flagstone, to the more isolated areas of West Africa, where political instability and lack of tourism infrastructure have put off all but the most hardy and adventurous surfers. Even in my adopted home of Wilyabrup in Western Australia, in the heart of the bustling Margaret River region, there's still opportunity to find quiet corners among the granite-fringed coastline for those willing to put in the effort.

Waves, surfers and destinations move fluidly in and out of vogue, but Indonesia remains a bastion of cool. The nation's hypnotic blend of tropical surf and cheap living has continued to prove a magnetic draw. Our voyage aboard the *Kudanil* gives us the opportunity to plot our own bearings through this surfing mecca – and to do so with a luxury filter. Surf trips are typically associated with nylon tents, cold water and a degree of physical hardship. On the *Kudanil*, it's cotton sheets, hot showers and chef-prepared meals. A dish of ceviche, for instance, made with fish plucked from the sea moments earlier, is given an Indonesian twist with lemongrass and coconut. It's served to us as day fades to night, overlooking the break we just enjoyed – this is living.

Waking at dawn one day, I take a bearing of our location, safely tucked into an anchorage off the small island of Raijua to the east of Sumba. Our interisland crossing was made at night to maximise the daylight hours. A dry wind tempers the tropical heat, and the coastal scene is less swaying palm trees and more low-lying, fractured ridge-lines. From the bow, we can make out a group of locals gathered on the low-tide reef. These people make a modest living by cultivating seaweed in tidal pools. I can't help but wonder what the residents make of us, clad in colourful Lycra and clinging onto boards as we motor by their island.

Out beyond their grass-roofed village, a left-hand wave refracts off the tip of the island, before mellowing out into a deep channel. Paddling into the line-up, I recognise why this spot is known as “the wedge”. The swell bounces off a raised ledge like a pinball machine, causing the waves to form triangular peaks that have a power disproportionate to their size. Suarez manages to catch one of the larger waves of the day, a chance meeting of two waves caught in a crosshair that slingshots her past the *Kudanil's* tender in a blurred rush of spray and hoots from the crew.

On our final night, moored off the coast of Timor, I take a quiet moment on the upper deck to give thanks to the ocean for providing our home and entertainment for the week. With the setting sun to the west and the south-east trade winds against my back, I ponder the concept of “shifting baselines” – the idea that succeeding generations fail to recognise changes in the natural world. In a surfing context, the opportunities for discovering pristine spots around the world may have diminished, but here amid the Savu Sea we had the uncommon fortune to surf empty waves in bays entirely devoid of human development or activity. Wherever you might be on your own personal surfing journey, it's a rare luxury worth seeking out. 🏄

The exclusive charter rates for the Kudanil Explorer are \$US20,000 plus tax per night for up to 16 guests and three children. [kudanil.com](https://www.kudanil.com)



DOWN THE BARREL
Indonesian surf guide
Wayan Santika takes on
the hollow surf of a break
in East Sumba.

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SURFING SAFARI

Zia Suarez waiting for one more wave. Opposite: The *Kudanil Explorer* moored off a remote stretch of Sumba.

